Mental Health in Recovery

“Although the specifics of mental health recovery in my life may be outside issues (medication, therapy, other treatment options), dealing with my mental health issues and recovery in this arena is as critical to my ability to stay clean and work a program of recovery in Narcotics Anonymous as living powerlessly, surrendering, and finding a power greater than me.”

In the Narcotics Anonymous program, every addict with a desire to stop using can be a member, and no member of NA need ever recover alone. Recovery is our common bond. Even though some of us may feel hopeless because of the wreckage of our active addiction, we are not helpless. We are able to benefit from the experience and suggestions of other members who are recovering in NA. Many of us felt a sense of despair in early recovery as we began to realize that our life was in shambles, and we felt deep sadness from putting down drugs and the lifestyle that came with them. In a sense, many of us felt as if we were leaving behind our best friend—or friends. Recovery can be painful.

That pain of early recovery, however, does not necessarily equate with having mental health issues. As the fog most of us experience in early recovery lifts and we are able to begin to address the problems in many areas of our life, we may feel more optimistic. Some of us, though, do not seem to gain a sense of well-being no matter how hard we try to put the pieces together. Through the process of working the Steps with a sponsor and learning to take better care of ourselves, many of us find it necessary, at some point in our recovery process, to seek outside assistance for problems other than addiction.

Getting clean and working Steps in NA leads all of us to find ways to take better care of our minds, bodies, emotions, and spirits. We do not all arrive in NA in the same condition, and so the way each of us takes care of those parts of ourselves will look different from one addict to the next. The most important thing for all of us is that we take care of ourselves the best we can and remain in close touch with our sponsor, other trusted NA members, and our Higher Power throughout the journey.

In seeking help for our mental health, some of us may be more direct and inquire as to whether we need medication; then again, others may struggle with the notion of having a mental health condition. Regardless of our feelings about the label associated with mental health, what does matter is willingness to seek outside help if we need it. Once we put down the drugs and enter recovery, we all want the opportunity to live happy, joyous, and free. This piece of literature reflects the shared experiences of NA members, including those who have found it necessary to seek outside help for mental health concerns and those who have recovered alongside them. In this pamphlet, there are sections meant to help all NA members with challenges that arise—the decision to seek help, concerns about medications, the stigma of mental health challenges, recovery, service, and being of support to each other.

Seeking Professional Help

We do not diagnose anyone’s condition or track the progress of our patients—in fact, we have no patients, only members. Our groups do not provide professional therapeutic, medical, legal, or psychiatric services. We are simply a fellowship of recovering addicts who meet regularly to help each other stay clean. It Works: How and Why, “Tradition Eight”

The Eighth Tradition in NA aptly illustrates that our focus is recovery from addiction; NA does not treat mental health conditions. Addicts who have thoughts or concerns about their mental health should be responsible and seek professional help. Some members have experienced that professional help aids them in facing a crisis
outside of their recovery in NA; others may find that long-term therapy and medications are needed. Our shared experience is captured well in Chapter Four of Living Clean: “When we use the tools available to us—calling our sponsor and seeking the experience, strength, and hope from others, allowing our support group to support us, and turning to In Times of Illness and other NA literature—we are able to make decisions we can be comfortable with, and take action to do the next right thing.” We are free to pursue our recovery in NA.

Through sharing honestly with a sponsor, we find freedom in NA. Holding on to secrets about mental health conditions and medications without telling at least one trusted friend may undermine our recovery. Many of us have found that shame and secrecy in any area opens a window for relapse. We need to be honest and truthful about our mental health—along with any medications we may need to take in our recovery. Working closely with our sponsor and other trusted NA members can help us to remain aware of our motives. We are all responsible for our own recovery and well-being.

Psychotropic Medication

It is possible to find freedom from active addiction in NA and to be taking medication prescribed by an informed healthcare professional for mental illness. In Times of Illness, Mental Health Issues

In NA, our primary purpose is to carry a message of recovery—this is true no matter what extenuating situations may present themselves. Attempting to address mental health challenges goes beyond the scope of carrying our message or helping a member stay clean. In meetings, no one is a professional; we are all addicts seeking freedom from active addiction. We have heard many times to leave medical issues to doctors; the same principle applies to mental health conditions.

We may be advised to take medications to treat our mental health condition. Medications need to be taken as prescribed by our healthcare professional; we do not self-medicate. Most of us have found it wise to inform our sponsors and perhaps a few friends in our support network. This action helps us to be accountable and allows trusted others to be our “eyes and ears,” helping to ensure that our recovery is intact and progressing forward. If we need to take psychotropic medication, we need to be mindful and aware of changes. The longer we are clean, the more our physical and emotional selves change; sometimes, these changes may have an effect on our mental health conditions. Sharing any perceived changes with our sponsors, appropriate healthcare professionals, and supportive friends is a critical step in maintaining a program of recovery.

Many of us have heard, either individually or in meetings, that members taking medication are not clean. However, some medications are prescribed to help manage symptoms that get in the way of leading a healthy, productive, drug-free lifestyle. Members who are open and honest with their sponsors and take psychotropic medication as prescribed by a healthcare professional are considered clean. In the appropriate circumstances, psychotropic medication does not compromise clean time.

Stigma and Shame

…our struggles with our mental illnesses and the way they impact our recovery are very much “inside issues.” We need to make this distinction to ensure that we don’t fail to seek additional help either because of stigma in the rooms or confusion about the relationship between mental illness and recovery. Living Clean, “Our Physical Selves”

As addicts, we may be prone to behaviors and actions that are not in line with spiritual principles. This could simply be described as our hearts and heads are not always aligned. Sometimes it takes years in recovery and working the Steps with a sponsor to improve our skills with spiritual principles such as compassion, acceptance, and kindness. We may often jump to judgment and act in ways that discriminate against others who are not like us. We tend to find reasons to separate ourselves from others. We can ask our sponsor or NA
friends for their experience and guidance. In NA, our primary purpose is carrying a message of hope, not judgment others.

If we have mental health challenges, we may be able to avoid feeling stigmatized in NA because of our condition by being careful about the level of detail we go into when we share about our situation in meetings. Instead, we work with our sponsor and trusted NA members on the ways our situation affects our recovery, and we continue working with appropriate professionals for issues beyond addiction and recovery. After all, the common denominator for all of us is recovery. One member shared:

“I struggled for years being more ashamed of my mental health condition than I ever was of being an addict. Today I realize that taking care of my mental well-being is a critical part of my overall recovery, and like everything else, the process of doing so is the solution to my struggles.”

Some members may be prone to isolate due to shame. Many of us are familiar with the saying “an addict alone is in bad company.” Isolation tends to lead us to dark places, with only our own thoughts to guide us. Those thoughts may bring us to scary places, such as a place from which it is hard to see how life is worth living. In the best circumstances, having gloomy thoughts would inspire us to call our sponsor or a trusted friend, or might prompt us to go to a meeting; sometimes we continue to move progressively downhill, caught in a web of negative thinking. In times like these, we may even entertain suicidal thoughts. One of the personal stories in our Basic Text (“Becoming Whole”) describes suicide as “a permanent solution to a temporary problem.” We need to bring ourselves out of the dark corner and back into living a program of recovery. Sometimes it will feel impossible to move out of that rut, but we need to persevere, putting one foot in front of another, until we are in a meeting surrounded by our people. We let shame and stigma fall away. A glimmer of hope begins to shift our thinking, and we are back on the road of recovery.

Recovery Happens in NA

Everything we do, everything that happens to us as a Fellowship, comes back to our simple message of hope and freedom...No one is too sick or too well, too rich or too poor, too far gone or too far away to qualify. It is available to us all. Guiding Principles, “Tradition Five”

All addicts are welcome in NA meetings, and everyone is free to hear NA’s lifesaving message. Often we gain a flicker of hope for ourselves because we feel a sense of belonging, and we identify with others in meetings. Once we are drug-free and on the recovery path, we strive to live in the solution and to practice spiritual principles in all our affairs. This is not accomplished by desire alone; we work with a sponsor, work the Steps, and share our recovery with others. In NA, the term power greater than ourselves can be used to refer to many things. Many members simply start with the power of the NA group. Just like all NA members, those who have mental health issues are encouraged to practice the principles of recovery in ways that honor our own personal beliefs. No addict is too sick or too far gone to recover. Recovery works for all addicts who want to stop using and are willing to make the effort.

Those of us who suffer from mental health challenges may want to deny our condition and may run the risk of self-deception about our condition. This will not serve anyone on a recovery path. We need to be willing to respond to our fear as Face Everything And Recover. We owe it to ourselves and to those we care about. One addict with mental health challenges summed up their situation by saying, “If I don’t work on both—recovery and mental health—I won’t be successful with either.” Our work on self-acceptance is crucial not just for our recovery, but also for our mental health. Facing life on its own terms gives us a chance for a fulfilling, productive life, drug-free. We hear the message of recovery in NA meetings, and we share with our sponsor, members in meetings, and our trusted friends.
Being of Service

Service is...our unique gift—something that no one can take away from us. We give, and we get. Through service, many of us start on the sometimes long road back to becoming productive members of society. *Just for Today, May 1*

Coming into NA, most of us did not have much self-worth; active addiction seemed to rob us of self-esteem. Through service, we find a sense of belonging and gain a sense of purpose in our lives. We begin to believe that our contribution is valuable; in turn, self-worth and self-esteem begin to flourish for those of us who give back to NA. This applies universally to all NA members, including those of us with mental health challenges.

Service is a collective action working with others, whether in a group or service committee. In service, the fact that we are each other’s eyes and ears is readily apparent. We need to reflect honestly on whether we meet the qualifications for our service positions, and we should be ready to assess our abilities with our sponsor or with another recovering member. This concept also applies if we take psychotropic medications for our mental health challenges. Sometimes, we may find that group-level service is the best fit; then again, others of us may find that we have a sense of stability on psychotropic medication, and know through our life experience that a position on a service committee will work well for us. We come to these decisions through discussions with our sponsor and by honestly looking at our strengths and limitations. If our use of prescribed medication affects our ability to carry out a certain task in service, we may find it best to seek another way of serving. There is no cookie-cutter model for being of service in NA; as long as we are clean, there is a service commitment for us. Service is truly a posture of the heart.

Supporting Each Other

We make the choice to be a positive force in the lives of the people around us. The process of working the steps has given us the ability to love and accept who we are, and become able to truly love others. *In Times of Illness, “Supporting Members with Illness”*

Through love, we learn to accept one another for who we are. No one is perfect; the longer we are in recovery, the more we realize that we continually strive to better ourselves. Those of us with mental health challenges are part of the “we” in NA. We all benefit from the love and support of the Fellowship, free of judgment. As one member shared, “We cannot help you with your psych concerns, but we can love and support you while you figure it out.” Our mental health well-being is necessary for successful recovery.

Many of us seek support from our sponsors and our NA support group; they may inspire us to support other members. Supporting one another can be as simple as making a phone call in a difficult time or offering to take someone to a meeting. When we reach out and break the barriers of isolation, we show that the care and love we have for one another is real. Those of us with mental health challenges appreciate support from other addicts as much as any other member. Supporting each other is unity in action. In NA, we strive to make sure that all have an equal opportunity to recover.

Reminder:

Draft, session materials to workshop review and input, and the online input form can be found at [www.na.org/mhmi](http://www.na.org/mhmi).